

MARK COHEN





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RECENT AMERICAN ART PHOTOGRAPHY has multiplied in a number of directions, forming distinct but often overlapping styles which increasingly segregate into factions. One very broad camp takes its departure from the "straight," documentary work of Lewis Hine. This peculiarly American humanist tradition (established unwittingly) began with a massive group of contradictorily poignant and matter-of-fact images of working-class American children and adults. It has since traced an arduous course, undergoing various shifts and digressions which in time would take it far from its source. If one thinks of Robert Frank, of Lisette Model, Diane Arbus, of Lee Friedlander or Roy DeCarava, and of Gary Winogrand, one confronts not just six personalities but six elaborate phenomena in the history of the medium. And of course there are others. What these figures share are an exclusive allegiance to black-and-white, single exposure, generally 35 mm. or up to 8 x 10 inch format images, and a tenacious insistence on a non-idealized view of the world. Each of these artists in his own way has forged an extremely stylized and formally precise style or set of styles. Each calls into question the multifarious basic structures potential to this guileful art form.

To narrow in on a few contemporary American photographers who seem to crystallize a particular aspect of the broad configuration I am delineating, one thinks further of Larry Fink, Todd Papageorge, Bruce Davidson. Their subjects range from figure compositions to landscapes, and from interior to exterior views. They all happen to be closer in spirit to Walker Evans and Paul Strand than to Henri Cartier-Bresson or Andre Kertesz. An especially important figure belonging within the rough outlines drawn here to isolate a segment of photography's complex art history, yet a figure who diverges from the rest (partly because his primary source *is* Cartier-Bresson) is Mark Cohen. Cohen has not only fully achieved his own identity but has crucially influenced many other photographers, probably without having received due acknowledgement. He is for instance perhaps the earliest, and certainly the most important, photographer frequently to use a strobe light in outdoor settings, thus obtaining his trademark of "bringing up" a sharply delineated yet often radically truncated or distorted foreground figure or object, separating it from its ambiguous or wholly indecipherable background, which ground (only subliminally received) nevertheless serves as the key to the whole picture's atmosphere, sometimes



releasing its symbolism or "meaning." With his unique approach to using an outdoor flash as a starting point, Cohen has proceeded since 1972 virtually to invent a full-blown self-contained photographic style. And he has proceeded simultaneously to evolve several other modes: his work is by no means uniformly light-strafted and blurred. It divides into types: People in groups or singly or partially represented, genre scenes, landscapes, atmospheric studies, and still lifes. Each of these subgroups of subjects can incorporate varying degrees of distortion or plainness.

Strangely, given the photographs' subtly intellectual nature and Cohen's manifest self-awareness, the artist is verbally inarticulate in defining what he is doing. Concomitantly his photographs, far from conveying ideas, become in themselves a blind surrogate for language. They are somehow laden with feeling and heavily mute, images that silently yet pointedly communicate gut-level insights, and whose capacity for interpretation keeps a certain flexibility. Far from being the product of either extended intellection or cultivation of taste, they are wrested from the world, achieved as though by force. In fact Cohen's way of taking photographs is sometimes literally assaultive. He often doesn't look through the viewfinder, but engages his subject at very close range with the camera in one hand, strobe in the other, moving about, sizing up—even while physically in motion—just what lens position will frame what he wants to see. Cohen makes masterful use of the accidental, while seeming in the act of framing intuitively to predict precisely the captured result of the flicked shutter.

If Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank and Gary Winogrand appear to be Cohen's main touchstones, still he has from the very first been a little bit freakish, and he continues to develop his own more and more independent look and vocabulary. Severing his reliance on the viewfinder,

Cohen often quite literally shoots from the hip, and of course in so doing he establishes a relationship with his human subjects which is sharply different from the usual one, in which the subject actually perceives the photographer as peering at and thus *appropriating* him with his scrutinizing eye. Cohen, who might hold the camera in one hand at around waist level, strobe in the other, engages the subject in a hauntingly ambiguous transaction. The photographer can develop an extraordinarily intimate engagement with the prey, while in a sense deceiving him. Sometimes his unencapsulated camera positions result in slightly skewed or tilted orientations. In these instances, it is the overall *atmospheric unity* rather than a severe compositional order that holds the image together, since the angle of view is disruptively vertiginous; in works such as #33 or #34 the gleaming flesh of the foreground figure, the velvety character of background texture, a sort of all-over shimmer, a membranous aura, all combine to attain a transcendent, improbable coherence.

Cohen's far-reaching impact on contemporary art photography is accountable partly by virtue of his having at an early time undermined certain academic conventions. He has broken many rules, though he doesn't by any means always work as an iconoclast or experimenter. For example, he capitalizes on the normally interfering graininess implicit in the process of enlarging 35 mm. negatives; instead of minimizing, he courts the murkiness occasioned by any motion of the camera during exposure; he purposefully avoids extreme value contrast. Finely graduated tonality rather than dramatic contrast as a virtue in itself becomes central to the artist's conception of the photographic print. He has ignored the various homilies about planes of focus, particularly the one that prescribes simple all-over legibility in the photographic image. However he remains a kind of classicist:







he never permits a collapse of formal structure in his works; nor, finally, any irrevocable dissolution of interior boundaries. Rarely does Cohen entirely forego recognizable imagery; an important exception is #32, which requires considerable scrutiny to interpret "correctly." It is a close-up photograph of a puddle, of water palpitating in the rain.

One might reflect, looking at a Cohen photograph like #32, upon Anton Ehrenzweig's notion of a dedifferentiated scanning of a field, or a phenomenon whereby one is seeing, not in an act of looking at an object separated from ground, nor even in an act of looking at an isolated "field," but is instead experiencing vision primally, in a way which doesn't necessarily "select out." Because it functions almost at a pre-conscious level, this mode of seeing barely allows any of the investment of meaning concomitant to "looking at." Viewed this way, one sees that Cohen is radically different, say, from Diane Arbus, or the great documentarian/artist Weegee, both of whom very carefully select for us. Cohen in contrast suggests rather than probes; he engages his photographic subject, whether or not a peopled scene, in a sort of complicitous act of portrayal and revelation, choosing moments that automatically condense the weight of significant gesture but that don't constitute essentialized or parodistic tableaux as Arbus or Fink do. There is a curious, seemingly self-contradictory double nature in many of Cohen's photographs; they can appear at the same time to be rather desultory patterns of light and twilight and dark, by nature uneventful, oblique, even obscure—and to be flashingly lucid maps, allegories, episodic pictures fraught with the complexity of all experience.

Observing the care and masterfulness with which Cohen composes and prints black and white images, noticing in particular his fastidious concern with tonality,

maybe it should be no surprise to learn that he can, with apparent effortless, make the transition into color photography. For he is a truly successful color photographer, one whose palette seems entirely artless while being theoretically correct in its chromatic procedure. His vision penetrates beyond the sense of a formularized prismatic opticality inherent in the 4-color process, to a kind of loose, psychological/painterly realm of expression. The color photographs employ the same softness as the delicate grey-toned works, and embody a similarly minute gradualness in their internal transformations. They are seductive, occasionally breathtaking. They are startling and lush and original. But finally they constitute a kind of adjunct, or footnote, to the black and white photographs. Though they are sometimes too gorgeous to convey the profound, through the color images we learn a great deal about Cohen in his more sustained achievement in the black and white photographs. We see more clearly than before the extent to which this most aesthetically attuned artist ultimately relies on directly psychological factors in the photographs in order to achieve both their formally- and socially-derived tensions. For we cannot read the color photographs as simply being about color, and thus we must ask ourselves what they are about. What they most often seem to be about is simply (and ineffably) a mood, a state of affect, a particular diffuse emotional response *per se*. That is all. They are about the way one might feel, the way Mark Cohen felt.

Cohen's body of photographs, shot almost exclusively in the vicinity of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, has been characterized as conveying a "sense of depression, of menace, and of highly charged but confined eroticism."<sup>1</sup>

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1. See bibliography, Julia Scully and Andy Grundberg



This is a seductive idea insofar as it is what we immediately feel in first encountering Cohen's photographs. But as we continue to look, and more to the point, as the body of work evolves—as the artist extends his geographic territory; there are in this exhibition and catalogue several images shot recently in England and Mexico City—it becomes evident that Cohen is not inordinately involved with any underlying temperamental disposition to anger or danger or pessimism. Certainly he is a libidinous artist, managing to project his own strong sense of sensuous potentiality in most of his visual transactions. Cohen cares passionately about men and women in their difficulty and panic. But he is not a proselyte or rhetorician; he is a successful artist by virtue of his potent impulse to aestheticize his world, not by virtue of any overtly moral or self-consciously editorializing stance. If some of his photographs are in fact provocatively menacing, it is by means of a positive attribute: it is because they are wedded to sexuality rather than rhetoric. It is always in the unstated, softly ringing undertones that the artist conveys his message.

We continue to need to redefine the delicate relationship in art photography between the social or moral references specific to a given image, and its more gratuit-

ous nature as a sensually gratifying work of art. It may be supposed that one cannot separate these two qualities in photography, since they coexist in life, and since the medium always presents the real world, or some semblance of a pattern that once did exist in time and space, did actually happen precisely in that configuration, from that one exact angle of view, to leave its traces on the photographic paper. Cohen, I think, at least helps to clarify the distinction that can be made between photography's "realism," or "verisimilitude," and its seemingly contradictory character of being artfully composed, being just as surely artificial and subjective as painting or drawing or sculpture. Cohen's best photographs comment on these layered ambivalences by gently veiling (yet revealing) their own natural recognizable features, while daring to become a repository of unedited self-expression. When we see classic Cohen photographs we know as surely who their author is as if their surfaces were applied with ink. And we are as certain that the works are not quite about what happened, as we are sure that they are not merely about other art.

JANE LIVINGSTON











































## CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

All *Untitled* images are reproduced on 16 × 20 inch photographic paper

### Silver prints

1. Wilkes-Barre, 1971
2. Wilkes-Barre, 1972
3. Pringle, Pennsylvania, 1973
4. Wilkes-Barre, 1973
5. Wilkes-Barre, 1973
6. Wilkes-Barre, 1973
7. Wilkes-Barre, 1973
8. Wilkes-Barre, 1974
9. Wilkes-Barre, 1974
10. Wilkes-Barre, 1974
11. Ashley, Pennsylvania, 1974
12. Wilkes-Barre, 1974
13. Scranton, Pennsylvania, 1974
14. Wilkes-Barre, 1974
15. Wilkes-Barre, 1974
16. Wilkes-Barre, 1975
17. Wilkes-Barre, 1975
18. Wilkes-Barre, 1975
19. Wilkes-Barre, 1975
20. London, 1975
21. London, 1975
22. London, 1975

### Ektacolor prints

23. Wilkes-Barre, 1976
24. Wilkes-Barre, 1976
25. Wilkes-Barre, 1977
26. Wilkes-Barre, 1977
27. Wilkes-Barre, 1977
28. Wilkes-Barre, 1978
29. Avalon, New Jersey, 1978
30. Wilkes-Barre, 1978
31. Luzerne, Pennsylvania, 1978
32. Wilkes-Barre, 1978
33. New Jersey, 1980
34. New Jersey, 1980
35. New Jersey, 1980
36. New Jersey, 1980
37. New York City, 1980
38. Wilkes-Barre, 1980
39. Washington, D.C., 1980
40. Mexico City, 1981
41. Mexico City, 1981
42. Mexico City, 1981
43. Mexico City, 1981
44. Mexico City, 1981
45. Wilkes-Barre, 1975
46. Pittston, Pennsylvania, 1975
47. Wilkes-Barre, 1977
48. Plymouth, Pennsylvania, 1977
49. Scranton, Pennsylvania, 1977
50. Wilkes-Barre, 1977
51. Wilkes-Barre, 1977
52. Wilkes-Barre, 1977

## MARK COHEN

Born Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, 1943.  
Began photographing, 1956.  
Graduated Forty Fort High School, Forty Fort, Pennsylvania, 1961.  
Attended Pennsylvania State University, University Park, 1961-63.  
Received B.A. Degree from Wilkes College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, 1965.  
Married Lillian Martha Russin, 1965.  
Opened Mark Cohen Studio, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, 1967.  
Taught King's College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, 1968-72.  
Son Benjamin Alexander born, 1969.  
Son Isaac J. born, 1971.  
Received John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowships, 1971, 1976.  
Taught Wilkes College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, 1973-77.  
Taught Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, 1975.  
Received individual fellowship in photography, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., 1975.  
Taught Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1979.  
Taught The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York City, 1980.  
Lives Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

## INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

- 1962 Pennsylvania State University, University Park.  
1965 Wilkes College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.  
1969 William Penn Memorial Museum, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.  
1973 The Museum of Modern Art, New York City.  
1974 Light Gallery, New York City.  
International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York. A traveling exhibition.  
1975 The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois.  
Light Gallery, New York City.  
1976 University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City.  
Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, New York.  
1977 Castelli Graphics, New York City.  
Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Catalogue.  
1978 Castelli Graphics, New York City.  
Robert Self Gallery, Ltd., London.  
1979 Akron Art Institute, Akron, Ohio.  
1980 Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.



## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1968 "Vision and Expression," International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York. Catalogue edited by Nathon Lyons, see bibliography.
- 1970 "Photography: New Acquisitions," The Museum of Modern Art, New York City.  
 "Split Focus," (two-person exhibition with Jerry Uelsmann), Art Gallery, University of Maryland, College Park.
- 1972 "60's Continuum," International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York. Traveling exhibition.  
 "Documentary Photography," Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- 1973 "Light and Lens," Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York. Catalogue.  
 "Fotografi Oggi: Gli Americani," Documenta, Turin, Italy. Catalogue.
- 1974 "New Images in Photography: Object and Illusion," Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida. Catalogue with introduction by John Szarkowski.
- 1974-75 "Photography in America," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City. Book edited by Robert Doty, see bibliography.
- 1976 "Peculiar to Photography," Art Museum, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Catalogue.  
 "American Photographs," Loretta Yarlow Fine Arts, Toronto, Canada.  
 "Spectrum," Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York.
- "Other Eyes," Arts Council of Great Britain, London. Catalogue with introduction by Peter Turner.
- "Twelve Contemporary Photographers," The Halsted Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan.
- 1977 "10 Photographes Contemporains," Galerie Zabriskie, Paris.  
 "Unposed Portraits," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City. Brochure.  
 "Flash," South Campus Art Gallery, Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, Florida. Catalogue.  
 "Some Twenty Odd Visions," Oregon Center for Photographic Arts/Blue Sky, Portland, Oregon. Catalogue. Exhibition traveled.
- 1978 "Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960," The Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Book by John Szarkowski, see bibliography.  
 "The Kirklands International Photographic Exhibition," Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, England. Catalogue with text by Valerie Lloyd.
- 1979 "Attitudes: Photography in the 1970's," Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California. Catalogue.
- 1980 "20 Americans," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art San Francisco, California. Catalogue.  
 "Aspects of the 70's/Photography," DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts. Catalogue.
- 1981 "Color Photography: 5 New Views," Marlborough Gallery, New York City.  
 "Couches, Diamonds, and Pie," P. S. 1, Long Island City, New York.



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